problem is a tension inherent in writing groups that requires students to “relinquish their texts, to create as well as to find meanings, to understand knowledge as socially constructed by groups as well as privately held by individuals, and to use their peers’ work as unattributed sources” (22).

This explanation of the social constructivist nature of group work prompted me to consider the potential for confusing students who were in the process of staking out a sense of ownership of their work. How did they feel about work that was produced in a group where peers functioned as “coauthors” (68)? Did they feel a sense of authority over a text they had revised by incorporating changes suggested by peers? Had I inadvertently confounded the notion of ownership when I encouraged my students to appropriate others’ ideas in their revisions? The last thing teachers want to do is to confuse students with mixed messages about knowledge making, but that’s exactly what we are doing when we fail to consider the varied and complex notions of ownership and the ways in which the tasks of group work conflict with those ideas.

Aside from the inhibiting effect of group work on students’ writing processes, Spigelman adds that student writers must also contend with social and institutional pressures created by the academic setting, which manifests in “varied interpretations of academic conventions regarding the ethics and methods of appropriating source material” (71). But, what are teachers to do? In most cases, we cannot change the realities of the setting for student writing groups. Nor can we remove the evaluative mandate of instruction.

Spigelman recommends that we begin by coming to terms with the power teachers have in writing classrooms, where “student writers must take into account the presence of the teacher, who as silent member, calls meetings, sets the agenda and monitors productivity.” We must also consider that student writers, unlike writers who belong to private groups, always face “issues of evaluation and, in many settings, real or imagined competition for grades” (110).

I had to admit that competition, which had nurtured my own writing, could be inhibiting my students’ ability to develop textual ownership in their written works. I wondered if competition, when combined with the pressures inherent in the setting, contributed to the silencing of my students? I had to admit that my lack of understanding of students’ perceptions of ownership probably had shaped the quality of group work. One thing was clear: I had many more questions than answers about my approach to teaching writing.

While Spigelman’s book doesn’t offer the kind of practical solutions many of us have come to expect, it is an important work which prompts writing teachers to reflect on the complications that arise from unexamined pedagogy, particularly as it relates to contradictory notions about ownership in writing groups. Her book is not for the faint of heart, and I wouldn’t recommend reading it unless you are prepared to allow her claims to provoke questions about your own classroom practices.

Rather than finding answers to my questions, I found that Spigelman’s careful treatment of the issues helped me gain a better understanding of the reasons my students have struggled to establish authority in their written works. With that understanding, I think I’m going to be a little more patient with my developing writers and allow them the space to take control of their work, word by word.

Jane Mihon is director of the Capital Area Writing Project at Penn State Harrisburg, where she also teaches humanities and writing. She has been a reporter for the Associated Press and ABC Radio, PBS news anchor for WITF in Harrisburg, and press secretary for the auditor general of Pennsylvania.

Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing


When I first saw that Peter Elbow had a new volume of essays, I was excited. Even when I disagree with what he says, I can always count on him to challenge my thinking about what is possible in the classroom. A cursory glance at the table of contents, however, disappointed me. Rather than a collection of new essays, this volume seemed to be little more than Peter Elbow’s Greatest Hits. Further, as I read the first “new” essay, I realized that it wasn’t “new” at all, but was simply a published version of a lecture I had heard Elbow deliver eight years ago.

As I worked my way through the essay, however, I realized that I wasn’t reading “old” material, but rather was enjoying the fruit of Elbow’s particular writing process—a process that can let a piece “cook” and “grow” for several years before it reaches publication. Besides, many readers probably missed most of these essays when they were first published, either because the essays appeared in less-prominent forums or because they were published ten or even
twenty years ago. Even those readers familiar with the essays will
discover that many have been revised, with some pieces merely
excerpted as “fragments” to complement other pieces in the
collection. Finally, Elbow has grouped the pieces topically to offer a
reasonably coherent presentation of his theory of teaching writ-
ning—a theory which merits careful consideration by anyone who

teaches writing.

For that reason alone, this volume belongs in the
library of everyone who teaches or studies
composition theory. Previous efforts to infer
Elbow’s theory, usually based on only a few articles,
come mostly from opponents of “romantic” or
“expressivist” approaches. Even though I have
trouble with Elbow’s claim that more writing—
with no intervention and no audience other than
the writer—leads “inevitably” to better writing, I’d
rather get the argument from Elbow himself than
from someone hostile to the concept.

Elbow’s theory is, as the title states, “hopeful.”
Although he acknowledges that “good writing takes
hard work and skill,” he bases his approach to
teaching writing on what he terms some “hopeful truths”:

It is possible for anyone to produce a lot of writing with pleasure
and satisfaction and without too much struggle.

It is possible for anyone to figure out what he or she really means
and wants to say and finally get it clear on paper.

It is possible for anyone to write things that others will want to read.

When people manage to say what they really mean and to get
themselves into their writing, readers tend to have the experience of
making contact with the writer—an experience that most people
seek (xiv).

These premises might seem more “utopian” than “hopeful,” but
Elbow embraces utopian models, arguing that we need such models
to help us see through deceptions served up by common sense. For
example, he notes that, although observation tells us the sun revolves
around the earth, we now accept as “true” a model that tells us the
exact opposite. If we accept such “truths” to help us understand the
physical world, it seems only reasonable to consider equally utopian
(or hopeful) “truths” to help us understand how writers write.

The first writer Elbow attempts to understand is himself. In
“Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard,” he recounts his struggles to write

in college—he dropped out of Harvard before his inability to write
casted him to flunk out—and attempts to make sense of his
experience. The next chapter, “A Map of Writing in Terms of
Audience and Response,” turns practical, offering twelve different
sites for writing, or twelve different kinds of writing teachers can
assign. The third chapter, “The Uses of Binary Thinking,” is highly
theoretical, arguing that thinking in opposites can help us better understand any object or idea under
consideration, and that “contrary claims can both be right or valid” (73). These chapters, along with a
fragment excerpted from the 1998 edition of
Writing Without Teachers, comprise the first
section, “Premises and Foundations.” The remaining
sections— “The Generative Dimension,”
“Speech, Writing, and Voice,” “Discourses,”
“Teaching,” and “Evaluation and Grading”—are
equally diverse in style and focus. Despite their
diversity, however (or perhaps because of it), these
pieces provide a reasonable explanation of Elbow’s
perspective on the enterprise of teaching writing.

Everyone Can Write is not a systematic explication
of a coherent theory of writing. Elbow himself admits that a
“skeptical reader might say that this book is just a collection of
unrelated essays . . . and not be wrong” (xiii). In fact, Peter Elbow’s
Greatest Hits might be an appropriate title. Still, this collection of
“hits,” drawn from three decades of musings and reflections,
demands the attention of anyone seriously interested in teaching
writing.

Having taught at two high schools and a community college, Tom
Thompson completed a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition at Florida State
University, and is currently an associate professor of English at The
Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, where he directs the
Lowcountry Writing Project.

Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing
Multigenre Papers

For me, part of good teaching includes creating new assignments to
fit the students’ interests and changes in society. When the year
changed from 1999 to 2000, my assignments seemed antiquated, and
I was even more inspired to find unique ideas for teaching writing.